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ABSTRACT

An assessment center can be used to identify school personnel with administrative potential and to discover what training programs are needed. Run by a group of cooperating school districts, the assessment center consists of three sessions and is held in a place convenient to all participants. Potential administrators are nominated by their superintendents to undergo the assessment process. Assessors are chosen from among regular full-time school personnel and trained by the center director. Assessment activities consist of group exercises, a written "in-basket" exercise, an exercise with a middle-school student, problem finding, an interview, and standardized tests including the Cooperative Reading Test and the Argyris model of the Scenario Test. Before coming to the center, participants prepare written descriptions of their present positions and of desired positions as well as a background information form. Three weeks later, a session is held to give each participant an evaluation report. The participant then decides whether to put the report on file for placement purposes. Two weeks later, a final session is held to design training programs to strengthen identified weaknesses. In spite of some deficiencies, the assessment center is successful in providing data for use in administrative selection and promotion. (Author/JM)

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Use of Assessment Centers in the Selection and Training of School Administrators

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This paper describes the adaption of the assessment center concept with follow-up training capability to a group of cooperative public school districts as contrasted to a center for a single company or a single school district.

The characteristics of this assessment center that make it unique and worthy of a national audience are:

1. Virtually all school districts can have access to the center due to the lowering of relative costs.

2. The center's creation of a manpower pool enables districts to consider, at minimal cost, many more candidates for administrative positions than if each school district were to act individually.

3. The center is transportable.

4. The assessors--customarily school personnel who, by the nature of their professional education, have had little if any training in formal assessment procedures--are provided opportunities to learn and evaluate new personnel procedures. The center's operation is based upon the two assumptions: that men and women who are employed full-time in responsible positions associated with the schools should be the assessors; and that such people can be trained on-the-job in a relatively short time. Whenever possible, assessors with experience are paired with assessors who have had no previous assessment center experience. This pairing enables a large number of persons to gain from the intrinsic professional self-analysis that occurs among the assessors.

EA 010 951

Need for and purpose of the center

The assessment center was originally designed to identify individuals in rural school districts who had administrative potential but who had little or no opportunity to demonstrate their capabilities, and to encourage those persons to become qualified administrators. This identification and pooling of potential candidates was needed because rural school boards needed and still need to select the best possible administrators. Since many colleges do not screen their graduates, and because state departments of education grant certificates on the basis of training alone, an administrative certificate is relatively easy to secure. This has resulted in a great number of people who hold college and graduate degrees and administrative certificates and who yet are not "with it." To aggravate these conditions, school districts generally maintain independent personnel programs without regard to state or regional needs. In addition, the federal courts have ruled that organizations must be prepared to prove that their selection and promotion standards are job-oriented and that all candidates are given equal consideration. Personnel policies in many schools could not withstand such close scrutiny The use of the cooperative assessment center has helped to obviate these nagging problems by providing an additional process of certification. It has allowed school systems to weed out of the applicant pool those unqualified for administrative positions, and made available on regional and state levels the names of those so qualified--thus making it easier to coordinate the supply of administrative talent to administrative need. Lastly, assessment center certification has helped provide objective data for use in selection and promotion.

As the center concept developed, the composition of the assessor group changed. We began with a group of all-white male superintendents; currently we employ black and white men and women from a great range of occupations--including school board members, junior and senior high school counselors and principals, junior college professors, and personnel from the state department of education.

Selection and training assessors

Whenever a superintendent elects to have a person/s evaluated, he contacts the University of Mississippi Bureau of School Services. An announcement of this request is then sent by the Bureau to all regional superintendents. (See blue handout.) Whenever eight or more participants are nominated, a center is established. The Director of the Bureau of School Services then prepares a list of possible assessors and submits the list to each superintendent for approval. Initial contact with assessor is by a form letter listing the names of all persons associated with that particular center. This letter is also sent to each participant. (See green handout.) The second contact is made on the day the assessment center is held. At this time each assessor is presented a notebook containing all examination forms to be used, guidelines for completing the forms, and detailed descriptions of the exercises to be implemented. After a brief study of the assessor's manual, the first exercise begins. Throughout the day, the director of the center conducts a series of brief training sessions for the assessors.

Schedule and description of exercises

The assessment center schedule occupies one full day and two additional sessions of two hours each. The full day is devoted to training assessors and assessing the participants. Approximately three weeks later, a two-hour reporting session is held at this time each participant is given the report of his evaluation. Questions are answered, reports are edited, and each participant signs a form indicating his decision on whether the center is to file his record and make it available for placement purposes. The final session, held two weeks later, is devoted to arranging programs designed to enhance the administrative potential of individual participants.

Originally, the assessment centers were located on a college campus in an attempt to give the operation prestige; however, the transportation inconveniences these locations inflicted upon the assessors and participants resulted in the centers being moved to the school districts. Successful centers have been conducted in city libraries, golf course club houses, bank board rooms, and school vocational-technical centers. Any building with one large and one small room can be used for a center. The large room must be of sufficient dimension to allow five groups of approximately six persons each to hold discussion without undue interference. The small rooms are used for testing purposes. Not more than 18 participants and nine assessors are involved in any one assessment center.

On the day of the assessment, both assessors and participants report at 8:30 a.m. and carry out assigned tasks until 4:30 p.m. (See orange handout.) Breaks occur only when tables and desks must be rearranged and

materials collected. Throughout the day, simulation exercises and testing are alternated, allowing the assessors to write down their observation of the exercises and to prepare for the next session while the participants are taking tests. See the yellow handout for the descriptions of the 20 variables that are observed.

There are six different tasks that the participants perform on the day of the assessment:

1. Simulated exercises in groups:

   Pay-off

   Promotion

2. In-basket exercise (Written).

3. "I've got a secret" exercise conducted with a middle-school student with a parent sitting at the table.

4. Problem finding. (Writing problems or questions based on an array of objects).

5. Standardized tests:

   Cooperative Reading Test

   DAT: Verbal Reasoning, Numerical Ability, and Abstract Reasoning.

   Scenario (Argyris model)

6. Interview.

Before coming to the center, each participant is directed to prepare written job descriptions of his present position and of a position he would like to have eventually, and to complete a three-page background information form.

In consideration of the above, the center has been designed so that assessors (1) observe the participants in both group and individual oral exercises with superiors, peers, and with a school-age child; (2) examine three samples of written work, with an opportunity to question the participant on the statements he made and the stands he took; and (3) interview assigned participants from school districts other than their own. The assessors do not have access to the participants' standardized test scores.

In the period between the assessment and the reporting sessions, the center director scores all tests, compiles data from the staff worksheets, edits the assessors' reports and remarks, and prepares a summary report for each participant. (See white handout.)

The grading of the scenario, prepared by each participant, is the initial exercise in the follow-up-training program. The subsequent practices and procedures tend to follow those outlined by Chris Argyris (Increasing Leadership Effectiveness, New York: Wiley-Interscience, 1976).

Deficiencies of the center

The major accomplishment of the present center relates to the diagnosis of strengths and weaknesses of individuals, whereas the major emphasis should be on treatment of these weaknesses. Plans are underway to develop a regional mutual-support system to help correct these habits. Once a person's weaknesses and strengths have been identified, the center will put him in touch with a successful professional person who has agreed to help him cope with his weaknesses and improve his skills.

Another deficiency of the center pertains to the control of the personal information gathered on participants. As the center concept becomes accepted by an increasing number of school districts, we will need to draw up formal guidelines for writing prescriptions, monitoring treatments and destroying out-dated information.

The exercises now being utilized in the center were selected because other assessment centers were using them, or because they seemed to be reasonable techniques to employ. To apply such instruments to mature people, and then to use their results to suggest courses of action involves considerable naivete. Validation studies, therefore, are long overdue.

ASSESSMENT CENTER

Wilkinson County Vocational Technical Center
Woodville, Mississippi
July 22, 1977

TRAINING MEMO

Participants

James Bateast, Woodville
Robert P. Bingham, Jackson (LA)
Inola Campbell, Woodville
Willard Cooper, Woodville
O. W. Cunnigen, Magnolia
Marvin E. Haynes, Centreville
Phillip Hewitt, Summit
Joseph E. Landers, Gloster
G. H. "Robbie" Robertson, Liberty
Rebecca T. Robertson, Gloster
Daniel W. Smith, Fayette
Joseph Taylor, Fayette
Robert L. Ward, Woodville
Cherrie H. Wilkinson, Centreville
George Wilkinson, Woodville

Assessors

Lynn Beal, Hazelhurst
Jessie Buie, Brookhaven
Leslie Daniel, Magnolia
John Dow, Brookhaven
Willie Hoskins, Natchez
Lorene Mock, Natchez
Elsie Murphy, Natchez
Hazel Thompson, Summit
Willie Tobias, McComb

Assisting

Charles Kempinska, Natchez

You have been identified as participants and assessors in an Assessment Center to be held at the Wilkinson County Vocational Technical Center at Woodville, Mississippi (one mile east of Woodville on Highway 24). You should plan to arrive a few minutes before 8:30 a.m. The day's activities will end at approximately 4:30 p.m.

You will probably experience one of the most unique and satisfying days in your professional career. In order to acquaint you with the operation of the center, you will find enclosed three pages from a proposal describing the rationale of the Assessment Center which you should read before July 22 because at the center only a few minutes will be devoted to any orientation.

Also enclosed are two Background Data forms. Participants are to use one copy for a worksheet. The second is to be completed along with the two Job Description forms and brought to the Assessment Center. You are to attach a small "school size" photograph or a "snapshot" to your Background Data form.

We will help on travel expenses, therefore, if you could carpool, we would appreciate it.

ASSESSMENT VARIABLES

1. General Education
   To what extent is this person proficient in verbal, arithmetic and reading skills?

2. Oral Communication Skills
   To what extent can this individual effectively present an oral report to a small conference group?

3. Written Communication Skills
   To what extent can this individual effectively express his or her ideas in writing? Do they make themselves understood?

4. Forcefulness
   To what extent does this individual make an early impression on others?

5. Likability
   To what extent does this individual make a likable impression on others?

6. Perception
   To what extent can this individual perceive subtle cues in the behavior of others towards him and take appropriate action?

7. Self-Objectivity
   To what extent does this individual realize his own assets and liabilities?

8. Adaptability
   To what extent can this individual, when motivated, modify his own behavior to reach a goal?

9. Need Approval of Superiors
   To what extent is this individual emotionally dependent on authority figures? Can the person take action without direct supervision of a superior?

10. Need Approval of Peers
    To what extent is this individual emotionally dependent on like and lower status associates?

11. Inner Work Standards
    To what extent will this individual want to do a good job, even if he could get by with doing a less acceptable job? How prompt is he or she?

12. School Attitude
    To what extent has this individual incorporated values such as good service and justice to the school's position on various topics, etc.?

13. Resistance to Stress
    To what extent will this individual's work performance stand up in the face of unusual pressures?

14. Range of Interests
    To what extent is this individual interested in a variety of fields of activity such as science, politics, sports, music, art, etc.? How aware is the person of current events, court rulings and changes in them?

15. Energy
    To what extent can this individual maintain a continuous high level of work activity?

16. Organizing and Planning
    To what extent can this individual effectively organize and plan his work and the work of others?

17. Decision Making
    To what extent can this individual make decisions of high quality, and how likely is he to make decisions when required?

18. Leadership Skills
    To what extent can this individual lead a group to accomplish a task without arousing hostility or alienating them?

19. Racial Relations
    To what extent does this individual relate to the concerns of persons of other races?

20. Demeanor
    To what extent does this person have a professional bearing in regard to neatness of dress, personal grooming and general physical fitness?

SCHEDULE

Wilkinson County Vocational Technical Center
Woodville, Mississippi
July 22, 1977

Session 1

	Assessors	Participants
8:30	General Session	General Session
8:45	Training	Test-Reading (30)
9:15	Pay-off	Pay-off
9:45	Tabulation Pay-off	In-basket
10:15	Break	Break
10:30	Processing In-basket	Preparation for promotion
10:50	Promotion	Promotion
11:30	Tabulation-Promotion	Test-Attitude & Behavior
12:00	Lunch	Lunch
1:00	Secret	Secret & Scenario
1:45	Tabulation-Secret	Problem
2:00	Prepare interview	Tests-Mathematics
2:30	Start first interview	Interviews & tests (30)
3:00	Write up	Continue tests
3:15	Start second interview	Interviews & tests(30)
3:45	Write up	STOP
4:00	STOP	

Session 2--Follow up

To be scheduled